Stark warning that common painkillers used by millions can increase risk of heart failure

* 00:01, 29 SEP 2016
* **BY** ANDREW GREGORY

DRUGS like ibuprofen can increase your chances of being admitted to hospital with heart failure caused by abnormal rhythm according to a study.

PAINKILLERS used by millions can raise your risk of heart failure, experts have warned.

Non-selective non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen can increase your chances of being admitted to hospital with the heart problem, according to a study.

Last year almost 15 million NSAID prescription items were dispensed in England.

Previous research has linked the drugs to abnormal heart rhythm - which can cause heart failure - and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke if taken regularly.

The drugs - together with a sub-group of anti-inflammatories known as selective COX-2 inhibitors - are used to control pain and inflammation.

They are commonly taken by people with arthritis.

But one of Britain’s leading experts has told our sister paper the Daily Mirror that for most people who take ibuprofen the risk remained “very small”.

The decade-long study, published in the British Medical Journal, involved almost 10 million people who take NSAIDs users from the UK, Netherlands, Italy and Germany.

Overall, 92,163 hospital admissions for heart failure were identified among the group by a team from the University of Milano-Bicocca in Italy.

The study found that people who had taken any NSAID in the previous 14 days had a 19% increased risk of hospital admission for heart failure compared with people who had used NSAIDs at any point in the past.

The risk of admission for heart failure increased for seven traditional NSAIDs (diclofenac, ibuprofen, indomethacin, ketorolac, naproxen, nimesulide, and piroxicam) and two COX 2 inhibitors (etoricoxib and rofecoxib).

The increased risk of hospital admission ranged from 16% for naproxen to 83% for ketorolac.

Researchers also found that the risk of heart failure doubled for diclofenac, etoricoxib, indomethacin, piroxicam, and rofecoxib used at very high doses. But they stressed this should be interpreted with caution.

Even medium doses of indomethacin and etoricoxib were linked with increased risk, the study found. But there was no evidence that celecoxib increased the risk of admission for heart failure at commonly-used doses.

The experts said their study “offers further evidence that the most frequently used individual traditional NSAIDs and selective COX 2 inhibitors are associated with an increased risk of hospital admission for heart failure. Moreover, the risk seems to vary between drugs and according to the dose.”

In an accompanying editorial, two Danish health researchers said that owing to the widespread use of NSAIDs, “even a small increase in cardiovascular risk is a concern for public health”.

They said the fact they can be bought over the counter in supermarkets “further fuels the common misconception that NSAIDs are harmless drugs that are safe for everyone”.

But Helen Williams, a consultant pharmacist for cardiovascular disease at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, told the Daily Mirror: “For most people the risk of using an NSAID like ibuprofen is very small.”

Professor Peter Weissberg, medical director at the British Heart Foundation, added: “This large observational study reinforces previous research showing that some NSAIDs, a group of drugs commonly taken by patients with joint problems, increase the risk of developing heart failure.

“It has been known for some years now that such drugs need to be used with caution in patients with, or at high risk of, heart disease. This applies mostly to those who take them on a daily basis rather than only occasionally.

“Since heart and joint problems often co-exist, particularly in the elderly, this study serves as a reminder to doctors to consider carefully how they prescribe NSAIDs, and to patients that they should only take the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible time. They should discuss their treatment with their GP if they have any concerns.”

John Smith, chief executive of the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, the trade body for manufacturers of branded over-the-counter medicines, said: “Safety is of paramount importance to the OTC medicines industry.

“If anyone has any concerns about an existing health condition, we would recommend they always speak to a pharmacist before taking any medicine to check for any potential drug interactions or health concerns.”